

The Inescapable God
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
Feb. 10, 2019 – PM Sermon
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Psalm 139

When our boys were younger, one of our favorite bedtime stories was Margaret Wise Brown's classic *Goodnight, Moon*. Many of you have read it to special children in your lives, and you love the rhythm and rhyme of the story just as much as we do. Brown has several other best-selling books for young children, including one that's a little more unsettling. It's called *The Runaway Bunny*. As the story opens, a young rabbit tells his mother that he is no longer satisfied with life in the nest. "Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away," the story begins. "So he said to his mother, "I am running away." One night as I read these opening lines to our two-year-old daughter, I wondered to myself at what I was saying. Why would I read her a story about running away from home? And why would the little bunny go on the run? There's no hint of the mother bunny being especially mean. The young bunny doesn't say he is lonely and needs to find a friend, or that he wants to go seek his fortune in the wide wide world.

Brown's story doesn't say why the little bunny wants to run away. But she spends the rest of the story describing the lengths to which the little bunny will go to evade his mother. He will become a fish and swim away. He will become a rock, high up on a mountain; or a blooming flower in a hidden garden. But at every turn he finds that his mother is one step ahead, ready to find him wherever he goes.

The writer of Psalm 139 imagines an equally incredible journey as he considers ways to elude Yahweh. "*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*" The psalmist imagines scaling the highest heights of heaven. He considers plumbing the deepest depths of the earth. He sings up the sun on the eastern horizon; he sails west across the Mediterranean. And as for flying away to the north or escaping to the south, well, Yahweh's there too. Verse 10 describes how God's hands guide and hold the psalmist wherever he goes. If God's eyes face the western horizon, looking for the psalmist far across the sea, his right hand can reach up to the north. His left hand reaches down to the south. There is no place, no time, no height or depth, no dimension or direction where God's restraining, guiding presence cannot go.

As the early church was doing the hard work of understanding and articulating who Christ is, a heresy that came to be known as Arianism surfaced. Arius and his followers held that the Son was a creature—not an uncreated, eternally co-existing divine member of the Trinity. One of Arius's mottos was: "There was when he was not." There was a time when Christ the Son was not. Arius's teaching about Christ's nature was soundly refuted and condemned. In the early 4th century members of the Council of Nicea formulated a way to affirm the Son's divinity and eternity that became the standard for orthodox Christianity. They expressed it in the first version of the Nicene Creed: Jesus the Son was "*from the essence of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made.*" Or, in other words: There is not when he was not! Similarly, and just as emphatically, this psalm says: There is not where he is not. There is no place you can go where he is not! There is no time you can live and no place

you can go; no height of glory and no depth of sin; no deepest darkness or dazzling brightness that can hide you from his sight. “Everywhere that we can be, you God, are present there.” You are the Inescapable God.

Why would the psalmist even think of fleeing from God? The first six verses of the psalm give us some clues. The Inescapable God has searched him, examined him, and knows him. Yahweh knows him—not as someone knows math facts or history trivia. Yahweh is intimately familiar with him inside and out: movements, motives, habits, thoughts, speech. Yahweh knows the psalmist better than spouses know each other, better than the psalmist knows himself. Verse 5 says, “*You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.*” Another way to translate “hem me in” can express the sense that God ties us up, confines us, or even besieges us, the way an army besieges a city. We are pinned to the wall. We can’t escape God’s examination. And that is scary. It’s the awesome reality affirmed by the writer of Hebrews: “*Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*” (Hebrews 4:13). We are answerable to God.

When I volunteered in youth ministry after college, we asked students to imagine a video camera strapped to their foreheads - like a GoPro. The camera would go with them everywhere they went and film everything they did. We’d reflect on the imaginary video as a way to help us all pay attention to our own actions and habits. This thought experiment still makes me squirm. Watching the tape of my life would be more painful than viewing the blooper reel here at church. It would make me reckon with my flaws and sins - all the ways I don’t measure up. There goes the camera, capturing it all. Day by day that running tape testifies to the fabric of fallenness, to life bent under the weight of sin, to redemption still-in-progress.

Owning the truth about who we are and what we do before ourselves is hard enough. But opening the books of our lives to judgment by a wider audience, that’s even more exposing. When troubling stories come out about public figures the way they have in the last weeks and months, we see them do what fallen human people do. Fleeing. Deflecting. Denying. Doing whatever seems expedient to escape those examining gazes. Outside observers don’t know us, really. They aren’t especially interested in our redemption. The only way it isn’t utterly terrifying to be known deeply, examined intently, and exposed broadly is when you are also loved just as deeply, intently, and broadly.

Maybe this is one reason why the psalmist seems suddenly eager to curse God’s adversaries in verses 19-22. Given the choice between an awe-inspiring God who knows him inside and out and the crowd aligned as enemies of that God, he’s going with God. “*If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.*” Strong words framed into a strong pledge of loyalty. With them the psalmist makes the enemies of God *his* enemies. With them he claims what has been true throughout the psalm: that the Inescapable God is not only the omniscient, omnipresent God of the universe but also the psalmist’s God too.

“*For you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made—your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*” The psalmist comes up from the depths and climbs down from the heights. He returns from the far side of the sea. He takes his small, trembling hands and places them in the hands of a much bigger, much holier God. He trusts that the God who crafted him, made him wonderfully

for God's sake. He knows that the God who searches him loves him still. *"Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."* And so the psalmist's song ends at the beginning, under the penetrating gaze of God. But at the end, he states God's knowledge of him not as abstract fact but as personal invitation. He asks God to go on searching, go on knowing, and go on testing and leading because his God is on his side.

This week I stumbled on a 2012 young adult novel by RJ Palacio called *Wonder*. The book describes the trials and triumphs of 10-year-old Auggie Pullman, who enrolls in school for the very first time as a fifth grader. Auggie entered the world with genetic facial anomalies. During early childhood he wore an astronaut helmet to cover his face, but now he's getting too old to hide. Auggie is smart and funny and loving. And he is also painfully aware of his cauliflower ears, his cheekbone-height, almost inside-out eyes. He worries about the way food will shoot out of his mouth at the school lunch table because of the way his jaw is shaped. It is a challenge even for the kindest kids to really "see" Auggie.

After his first day at school, Auggie comes home proud of himself but exhausted. He is relieved when his mom reads to him at bedtime instead of "talking" to him about his day. As Auggie listens, the day cascades over him and he begins to cry. His mom stops reading and wraps her arms around him. Palacio writes: 'It's okay,' she whispered in my ear. 'It'll be okay.' 'I'm sorry,' I said between snuffles. 'Shh,' she said, wiping my tears with the back of her hand. 'You have nothing to be sorry about.' 'Why do I have to be so ugly, Mommy?' I whispered. 'No baby, you're not.' 'I know I am.' She kissed me all over my face. She kissed my eyes that came down too far. She kissed my cheeks that looked punched in. She kissed my tortoise mouth" (Palacio, *Wonder*, 60).

Auggie's mother sees that he is fearfully and wonderfully made—a wonder. She hears his vulnerable admission and loves him. And her love covers over his brokenness. It's a picture of God's love for us. Some of you may sympathize with the psalmist's visions of running away tonight. Being open to God's examination makes you hyperventilate because there are things that you'd rather not even admit to yourself. But take heart. Listen to what Paul says in Romans 8:
³³ *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.*
³⁴ *Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us....³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,^[k] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

In Christ, there is no time or place where God's love does not follow us. God's love will not let us go. This love does not leave us vulnerable and exposed. No. Jesus comes to the far side of the sea to find us. He sees our sin and brokenness and wraps us in his righteousness. In him we are no longer exposed but covered and unafraid in the light of God's loving presence. He places his hand upon us and says, "You're mine." Amen.

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